

Taming the media in a school crisis

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TALKING TO THE MEDIA in the middle of a school crisis is the last thing school leaders feel like doing. But it's one of the most important things they must do.

When we talk about a school crisis, we're not only talking about the death of a student under school supervision or sexual allegations against a staff member. A crisis arousing media interest could include anything from claims a school is weak on bullying to a complaint about school uniform policy.

There is one common denominator among these examples and hundreds more. If you don't deal with them properly in the media, your school can lose its reputation.

So what should you do when you get that first phone call from a reporter? Do you say "no comment", refuse to take the call in the first place, start talking to the reporter without preparing or something else.

You must front

The first thing you need to realise is that you must front up unless there is some very good reason not to. If it's about your school, the media will logically come to you first. You should see this as an opportunity and not look at it with the view that the media are out to get you.

They have come to you, so now you have the opportunity to control the story. Remember, the story will run anyway, so you might as well be in it and get your point of view across. If you don't talk, reporters will find someone else. Two things can happen here. Those people may get their facts wrong and they may not be sympathetic towards you or your school.

Also, in the subsequent news story, the reporter will say you refused to comment. This makes you look guilty and unwilling to defend your school.

So you must front. But how should you handle that phone call from the reporter I mentioned earlier. Firstly, find out exactly what the reporter wants to talk about and secondly, buy some time. Say you are in a meeting, but you can call back soon. This will give you time to settle yourself down and prepare for the interview.

Preparation

Preparing for a media interview is different from preparing for any other conversation. You need to start off by composing what we call a media message. This is the best way to get your points across in a way the media will use and the audience will understand. This must include your three most important points and last no longer than 30 seconds. This may seem strange, but it's the best way to get ready for your interview.

To get your media message right, you need to write down everything

you would like to get across in the interview. You then need to narrow it down to the three most important. This may seem difficult, but it's vital. This is because a news story only ever has two or three points in it. You need to make sure the ones you want get through. If you told the reporter 57 points, he or she will go away and whittle them down to three. This way, you become the editor.

What should your three points be?

If it's a crisis situation, often your three points can follow a standard pattern we teach. The first point can be showing some regret for the situation. For example, if a student had been killed the point could be something like: "Our hearts go out to the friends and family of James."

The second point can show what you are doing to help the situation, or as we call it, your response.



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In this case it could be: "We are doing all we can to support James's family through this difficult time."

The third can often be restitution, or what you will do to minimise anything like this happening again. This could be something like: "We will be launching our own investigation to see if there is anything we can do better to minimise the chances of this ever happening again."

Along with these messages, you want to organise different ways of saying them. The best way to do this is by using words that the media love to use in their sound bites. These are the pieces you see on TV, and hear on Radio news stories where people are quoted directly. In the print media, these are called quotes.

If you can dress up your key points by using things such as analogies, clichés, examples and emotion, these points are likely to make the final cut in the subsequent news stories. For example, while you

would say the third key message above as is at some point, you could also say it another way that would be more attractive to media. The key point was: "We will be launching our own investigation to see if there is anything we can do better to minimise the chances of this ever happening again."

Using a cliché, it could also be said: "We will leave no stone unturned until we've done everything we can to stop this happening again."

The next thing you need to do is predict difficult questions and come up with answers to those.

The interview

The entire aim of your interview is to get your three points out as often as you can. You will say the points in different ways to stop sounding like a broken record. This is also where sound bites are important. You're probably wondering how

you keep coming back to the same points again and again, particularly if they don't relate to a question. I'm certainly not telling you to avoid the question. Do answer the question, but do it briefly if it doesn't relate to a key point. Once you've answered it briefly, you do what we call bridge back to a key point. Bridging is how you transfer from answering the question to your key point.

For example, if a reporter asked you: "What do you say to parents who have been concerned for some time that this could happen," you could reply with, "Now's not the time for pointing the finger, but what I can tell you is that we will be launching our own investigation to see if there is anything we can do better to minimise the chances of this ever happening again."

Don't speculate

In crisis situations like this, reporters are likely to ask you to speculate.

Don't fall into that trap. If you are asked to speculate, just bridge back to a key point. For example, in the example we've been using, a reporter may ask: "What do you think killed this student?" Your response must be something like: I wouldn't want to speculate on that, but what I can say is that our hearts go out to the family and friends of James."

By following this advice, you'll survive your media interviews in a crisis and maintain the reputation of your school. However, I must emphasise that mastering the media is about practice. It's like riding a bike. You can read as many books and articles as you like, but until you get on the bike, you'll never learn. The answer is a media training course where this information is covered in more detail and you face the camera. It's best to make mistakes and learn in a training environment than on One News or Campbell Live. **SN**

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